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GROUP PORTRAIT: THE *ISPETTRICI NAZIONALI* OF THE ITALIAN FASCIST PARTY 1937-
1943

Perry Willson

The highest rank that was ever open to women in the Italian fascist party was that of *ispettrice nazionale* (National Inspectress). From 1937 onwards, the *ispettrici* provided a group leadership for the party's rapidly expanding women's section. They were not, of course, the only women to play a political role in the fascist *ventennio*. There were others who exercised more behind-the-scenes influence, but the *ispettrici* were different since they held high-ranking, official positions. They broke new ground as the first group of Italian women, apart from a small number of socialists like Anna Kuliscioff, to hold prominent positions in a political party. Prior to the rise of fascism, female political engagement had mainly taken place not in parties but in autonomous women's organisations, many of them feminist. Although in practice the *ispettrici's* actual political power was always constrained, their symbolic importance, as public, visible emblems of women's presence in the political sphere, should not be underestimated. As such, a better understanding of their role seems pertinent to broader discussions of women's gradual, but often laborious, advance in the political sphere in twentieth-century Italy.

Historians, however, have shown little interest in them and, to date, there has been no systematic investigation of these national hierarchs.¹ This reflects the

¹ Two works that do look at female fascist hierarchs are Helga Dittrich-Johansen, Le "militi dell'idea". Storia delle organizzazioni femminili del Partito Nazionale Fascista, Florence, 2001 and Victoria De Grazia, How fascism ruled

fact that, despite undoubted increased historiographical interest in the lives of women under fascism in recent decades, the role of women in the party itself remains a relatively neglected topic. Popular, journalistic books on women and fascism have similarly largely ignored the *ispettrici*, instead selecting as noteworthy 'women of the blackshirt regime' more exciting figures like film stars, Mussolini's lovers, royalty, partisans, and the female auxiliaries in the Second World War - Italy's first female soldiers.²

This historiographical neglect of the *ispettrici* is doubtless primarily because, as prominent female fascists, they constitute a rather unpalatable topic for the feminist historian. Moreover, the fragmentary state of the documentation relating to them in the fascist party archives further reduces their appeal to the researcher. The biographical information included here has had to be pieced together from a variety of sources. For a handful of these women a 'personnel file', including information on their pay and sometimes correspondence or even a cv, has survived in the national party archives but most of these folders are empty or simply missing. Consequently, it has been necessary to search quite widely for biographical information, both across and beyond the party archives. Inevitably, the resulting picture is uneven with far richer information for some women than others.

women. *Italy 1922-1945*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1992. Neither work focuses specifically on the *ispettrici nazionali*, although both discuss some of them.

² See, for example, Marco Innocenti, *Le signore del fascismo. Donne in un mondo di uomini*, Milan, 2001. One exception is Sergio Vicini, *Fasciste. La vita delle donne nel ventennio Mussoliniano*, Bresso, 2009, which does mention some *ispettrici*.

The *ispettrici* do, nonetheless, merit a closer look, and enough can be gleaned from archival and press sources to build up a group portrait of them, looking at who they were, their ideas and motivations and how they managed to rise to this prominent position. On all of these topics the existing historiography sheds only limited light. As will be demonstrated below, moreover, some of the scant historiography that does exist on women's role in the PNF has muddied the waters with some factual errors that have led to an underestimation of the extent to which women took on party leadership roles in a voluntary, rather than paid, capacity.

I

The first *ispettrici nazionali* were appointed in January 1937. They were the female equivalent of the all-male corps of *ispettori nazionali* (likewise a new rank). The women were not, however, admitted to the ranks of the *ispettori* but instead formed a separate, parallel rung of their own in the party hierarchy. In the PNF women's activities were always kept separate and strictly gender-defined.

The reason for their appointment was the recent growth of the Fasci Femminili (FF), the women's wing of the party and the only way that women could join it. In the 1920s, the FF had been barely tolerated by male party hierarchs, many of whom rejected the idea of women having any sort of political role at all.³ Many

³ On early fascist women see Stefania Bartoloni, Il fascismo e le donne nella "Rassegna femminile italiana" 1925-30, Rome, 2012; Denise Detragiache, 'Il fascismo femminile da San Sepolcro all'affare Matteotti (1919-1925)', Storia contemporanea, 14:2 (1983). On the FF more generally see Dittrich-Johansen, Le "militi dell'idea"; Perry Willson, 'Italy' in Kevin Passmore (ed.), Women, gender and fascism in Europe, 1919-1945, Manchester UK and New Brunswick, 2003.

saw fascism, with its squadrist, combatant origins, as intrinsically male and male fascists themselves frequently used the word 'virile' to describe their politics.⁴ From the early 1930s, however, with the launch of PNF secretary Achille Starace's new policy of 'going to the people', there was a massive recruitment drive and female membership began to rise rapidly.

During the early years of fascism, the FF had had, albeit briefly, a single national leader. In late 1924, in the aftermath of the Matteotti crisis, the former Red Cross nurse and moderate feminist Elisa Majer Rizzioli (1880-1930) was appointed to the new position of Inspector of the Fascist Women's Groups. She, unlike the later group of *ispettrici*, was given a seat on the fascist party's National Directorate. The hostile manoeuvrings of male fascists who wanted to deprive the women's groups of any power and influence, however, rendered this experiment short-lived. In January 1926, PNF Secretary Roberto Farinacci, a prominent opponent of the ambitions of some female fascists to have a meaningful political role, closed down the Inspectorate. After this, the FF never again had a single, national leader, and no other woman was ever again to sit on the party Directorate. They lost any autonomy they had previously enjoyed and were subordinated to the male party hierarchy. At

There are also some local studies such as Sara Follacchio, Il fascismo femminile nel pescarese, published as a special issue of Abruzzo Contemporaneo, 13 (2001).

⁴ On fascism and masculinity, see Sandro Bellassai, 'The masculine mystique. Antimodernism and virility in fascist Italy', Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 10:3 (2005), pp.314-335; Barbara Spackman, Fascist virilities: rhetoric, ideology and social fantasy in Italy, Minneapolis and London, 1996.

local level, fascist women continued to organise their own activities (mainly forms of politicised welfare) but with little encouragement from local fascist men.

From the early 1930s, however, female party membership began to be actively encouraged and party sections were instructed to set up FF groups. Numbers were further boosted by the foundation in 1933 (initially as part of the fascist unions, then transferred to the PNF in 1934) of the Sezione Massaie Rurali (Rural Housewives Section), a specialised FF section for rural women, particularly peasants. In 1937, a second section was added, the Sezione Operaie e Lavoranti a Domicilio (SOLD – Section for Workers and Homeworkers), to mop up any remaining categories of women, including servants.⁵ The two sections involved the mainly middle class FF women (who ran them) in a wide range of new activities like organising poultry-farming competitions.

The series of wars that fascist Italy became embroiled in further fuelled the exponential increase in FF activities. Once Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, women were mobilised in the ‘resistance’ to the League of Nations sanctions. The FF busied themselves with promoting ‘autarchic housework’ and ‘the fight against waste’ and urging women to ‘buy Italian’. The Rural Housewives were exhorted to increase production of foodstuffs and raw materials to replace imports. This trend was further enhanced once Italy joined the Second World War.⁶ FF activities now

⁵ On these organisations see Perry Willson, Peasant women and politics in Fascist Italy: the Massaie Rurali, London and New York, 2002; Perry Willson, ‘Italian fascism and the political mobilisation of working-class women 1937-1943’, Contemporary European History, 22:1 (2013), pp.65-86.

⁶ The role of the FF on the Second World War home front has yet to be studied. On the civilian mobilisation for war see Paola Ferrazza, ‘La mobilitazione civile in Italia 1940-43’, Italia

embraced tasks like assisting the war wounded, soldiers' families, bombing victims and refugees; air defence; promoting urban 'war vegetable gardens' and supervising workshops where military uniforms were made.

All this upsurge of activity required coordination but, in party headquarters, after the fall of Majer Rizzioli, the FF were left with no real central leadership and the women's organisations were overseen by a male hierarch assisted by Angiola Moretti, Majer Rizzioli's erstwhile secretary. Moretti held the position of Secretary to the Fascist Women's Groups until approximately 1930. In 1932 Rachele Ferrari del Latte, a fascist stalwart from Milan, began work in PNF headquarters, partly assigned to organisational duties for the FF. By the late 1930s, such a slender operative core no longer sufficed. The decision to resolve this problem not by simply recruiting more clerical assistance but by creating a new prestigious rank testifies to the growing importance of the work done by the women's organisations.

II

The role of the *ispettrici* was both administrative and political. As their job title suggests, they carried out inspections of provincial FF federations but they also regularly toured around Italy delivering rousing speeches to the female party faithful or the public. This often meant travelling far from home. In June 1938, for example, Laura Marani Argnani (from Reggio Emilia), was sent to Lecce and Wanda Gorjux

contemporanea, 214, 1999, pp.21-42. On the Ethiopian War see Perry Willson, 'Empire, gender and the "home front" in Fascist Italy', Women's History Review, 16:4 (2007), pp.487-500.

(from Bari) to Vicenza, lengthy trips for both of them.⁷ Such journeys were doubtless aimed at imposing a real national discipline on the party, rather than simply allowing each *ispettrice* to speak in nearby provinces. The *ispettrici* also played a role in the ceremonial aspects of the regime. In 1939, for example, four *ispettrici* took part in the national *leva fascista* ('flying up' ceremony) for the youth organisations.⁸ All carried out provincial inspections and gave speeches, and most also wrote regularly for the party press, but otherwise their role varied, each assigned a different area of FF work. A few worked in central party headquarters - issuing orders to local federations, liaising with other national organisations, and so on. Most, however, remained at home, often combining their new role with continued service as provincial fiduciaries (FF leaders in each province).

Being an *ispettrice* brought these women a visible, public role and a good deal of responsibility. It also brought financial rewards. By 1940, an *ispettrice's* salary was L.3,000 per month, a considerable sum for a woman at the time (although their income was only topped up to this amount if they also held other paid, public employment of any kind).⁹ Their actual power was, however, constrained by the fact

⁷ Foglio di disposizioni (hereafter FD) 1084 8 June 1938, Atti del Pnf, a.XVI, 1937-8, Rome. The Atti del Pnf are collections of party circulars and sheets of 'orders' and 'dispositions' (ordered chronologically) relating to each 'fascist year' (starting on 28 October). The numbering starts afresh with each new party secretary.

⁸ FD 1431, 11 Oct 1939, Atti, a.XVII, 1938-9.

⁹ See typed note from Giovanni Montefusco, dated 9 Oct 1940, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, PNF, Direttorio Nazionale, Servizi Vari, Serie II (hereafter ACS, DN, SV, SII), b.10, fasc. 'Clara Franceschini'. *Ispettrici* who were also fiduciaries similarly just had their provincial pay topped up to the higher *ispettrice* rate.

that they always had to answer to male hierarchs. From January 1937, for example, the first *ispettrici* worked under the deputy party secretary (and future party secretary) Adelchi Serena.¹⁰ This hierarchical subordination was underscored by the brief description of their role in the FF regulations, issued in the 'fascist year' of 1939-40, which stated (Article 6): 'The *ispettrici* of the women's organisations of the PNF are nominated by the Secretary of the PNF and their role is to carry out the tasks that he entrusts to them.'¹¹

This situation was in part a product of the structure of the PNF itself. The party had been gradually marginalised during the 1920s in order to strengthen Mussolini's own position. By the 1930s it had lost its previous dynamism and was increasingly a cumbersome, bureaucratic, top-down organisation. Its leaders were appointed from above and its activities, mainly concerned with 'the organization, control, and political education – in the fascist sense – of the masses',¹² dictated from above.

Both sexes were, however, far from equally disempowered in the party: although men dictated to women what the FF should do, no high-ranking party women had any say in what men should do. Their authority, such as it was, was only ever over lower-ranking women. The *ispettrici* were appointed to look after the women's organisations, effectively a female ghetto within the party. Tellingly, none

¹⁰ FD 719, 19 Jan 1937 Atti, a.XV, 1936-7.

¹¹ PNF, Fasci Femminili, Sezione Massaie Rurali, Sezione Operaie e Lavoranti a Domicilio. Regolamenti, Rome, 1939-40, p.6.

¹² Emilio Gentile, 'The Problem of the Party in Italian Fascism', Journal of Contemporary History, 19:2 (1984) p.261.

of the *ispettrici* was ever admitted to the PNF National Directorate. According to Victoria De Grazia, in 1938, *ispettrice* Clara Franceschini's name was put forward for a seat on the Directorate but nothing came of it.¹³

De Grazia has argued that women were given no real say in the party, not even consulted on major decisions about their own organisation, such as the founding of the two sections for peasant and working class women.¹⁴ Although it is doubtful whether the archival sources are really there to confirm this statement, it does seem to be broadly correct.¹⁵ The situation was not, however, static since the advent of war made the activities of the women's organisations more important, as part of the 'home front'. A clear indication of this was the foundation, in January 1941, seven months after Italy joined World War Two, of a new central FF management committee (Consulta Centrale dei Fasci Femminili). Admittedly, the Consulta was chaired by the (male) PNF Secretary and three other male hierarchs had seats on it but the rest of its membership, which included all the *ispettrici*, was female.¹⁶

¹³ De Grazia, How fascism ruled women, p.265.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.268.

¹⁵ Less convincing is her assertion that: 'The men in charge, first and foremost Starace, dictated the little details as well: from the fabric to be used for uniforms to the stitches designing the banner and flame on the SOLD's neckerchiefs.' (Ibid, p.268) Starace was indeed very interested in the details of uniforms (for both sexes) but the SOLD neckerchiefs had neither flames nor banners. Instead they featured the *fascio littorio* and, repeatedly, the word DUCE. (For a description of the neckerchief see, Alba Pochino, 'Il fazzoletto distintivo', Lavoro e Famiglia, 1:2, April 1938.)

¹⁶ FD 42, 10 Jan 1941, Atti, a.XIX, 1940-41.

The paperwork from this committee does not seem to have survived in the archives but its remit suggests that women's opinions were valued in a consultative framework at least. This was doubtless because most of the *ispettrici* were women who brought to the table a wealth of knowledge about how the FF actually worked at grass-roots level. It was pretty safe, moreover, to delegate at least some decision-making to this particular group, as a closer examination of those appointed demonstrates.

III

A total of twenty-six women were nominated to the position of *ispettrice nazionale*, although, for reasons that will be explained below, nine of them never actually took office. The first two appointments (on 13 January 1937) were Clara Franceschini and the nursing and welfare expert Itta (Giuditta) Stelluti Scala Frascara, provincial fiduciaries of the northern rice-growing province of Pavia and of Rome respectively. On 10 September 1937 they were joined by three other provincial fiduciaries: Laura Marani Argnani - a successful and energetic organiser from Reggio Emilia, Olga Medici di Vascello Leumann from Genoa and the journalist Wanda Gorjux Bruschi from the southern province of Bari.¹⁷ A further appointment came on 5 November: the war widow Teresita Menzinger di Preussenthal Ruata - fiduciary in Perugia.¹⁸ None of these four moved to Rome but combined their new role with continuing service as provincial fiduciaries. In February 1939, Sofia Bertaina della

¹⁷ FD 865, 10 Sep 1937, Atti, a.XV, 1936-7.

¹⁸ FD 897, 5 Nov 1937, Atti, a.XVI, 1937-8.

Chiesa di Cervignasco, provincial fiduciary from Cuneo, was added¹⁹ and, on 30 October 1939, Lola Carioli Condulmari (Milan), although the latter appointment was then almost immediately revoked.²⁰

Another six were added in the months prior to Italy's entry into the war. On 24 December 1939, Angiola Moretti and Rachele Ferrari del Latte – both with experience in party headquarters – became *ispettrici*.²¹ The other four were all provincial fiduciaries: Ignazia Cavalli D'Olivola di Pettinengo (Turin) appointed 7 December 1939;²² Amalia Oddone Mazza (Novara) appointed 24 January 1940;²³ Anna Maria Dalla Rosa Giusti (Cremona) appointed 7 March 1940;²⁴ and Gina (Luisa) Federzoni, former fiduciary for Rome, appointed 2 May 1940.

Gina Federzoni's term of office proved brief since, in August 1940, all the *ispettrici* in post were sacked and only some reappointed, initially with the new designation of Dirigenti per le Organizzazioni femminili del PNF (Leaders of the PNF Women's Organisations). Italy was now at war and a more streamlined, efficient

¹⁹ FD 1270, 24 Feb 1939, Atti, a.XVII, 1938-9.

²⁰ The reasons for this are unclear but an unsigned letter, headed only Milano, 23 Nov 1939 describes her as inefficient and hard to work with. ACS, PNF, Situazione Politica ed Economica delle Province (hereafter SPEP), b.6, fasc. 'Milano'. She was Milanese Provincial Fiduciary 1935-1940. Her appointment as *ispettrice* was announced in FD 1450, 30 Oct 1939, Atti, a.XVIII, 1939-40.

²¹ FD 27, 24 Dec 1939, Atti, a.XVIII, 1939-40.

²² FD 20, 7 Dec 1939, Atti, a.XVIII, 1939-40. She claimed PNF membership since 20 March 1926.

²³ FD 61, 24 Jan 1940, Atti, a.XVIII, 1939-40. On her see ACS, Segreteria Particolare del Duce-Carteggio Ordinario (hereafter SPD-CO), 210.898, fasc. 'Oddone Mazza, Ing. Filippo, Console Generale della Milizia, Novara'.

²⁴ FD 96, 7 Mar 1940. Atti, a.XVIII, 1939-40.

system was needed. Only five of the previous team (Medici Del Vascello, Moretti, Franceschini, Ferrari del Latte and Giusti Dalla Rosa) were reappointed. They were joined by two new faces - Laura Calvi Roncalli (Bergamo) and the social work expert Licia Abbruzzese.²⁵

This drastic reordering did not, however, last and soon after the title of *ispettrice* reappeared and numbers rose again, so the 'reorganisation' was effectively a sort of mini-purge. By January 1941, there were eleven *ispettrici* in total. Three worked at party headquarters - Franceschini (put in charge of the FF and the Rural Housewives; assistance to soldiers' families; training for the 'fascist home visitors'; liaison with the maternal welfare agency ONMI); Ferrari del Latte (responsible for 'culture, propaganda and the press'); and Abruzzese (SOLD; training to prepare women for the 'colonial life'; liaison with the party mass leisure organisation). The increasing workload at party headquarters is clear from the fact that they were given three female assistants - Bice Parmeggiani, Lidia Quadrio, Ines Ponticelli – all given the rank of 'fiduciary' (hitherto reserved for provincial leaders).²⁶ The eight other *ispettrici*, at this date, were Medici del Vascello; Giusti Dalla Rosa; Moretti; Menzinger; Marani Argnani; Gorjux Bruschi; Calvi Roncalli and Maria Pia Pironti. Of these, the only new face was Pironti, who also held a high rank in the Italian Red

²⁵ FD 182, 23 Aug 1940, *Atti*, a.XVIII, 1939-40. Abruzzese does not seem to have previously been a fiduciary but she probably taught at the party's social work college given that her publications include *Guida per le assistenti sociali: lezioni tenute alla Scuola Superiore di assistenza sociale del PNF l'anno 1937-1938*, Rome, 1939.

²⁶ FD 42, 10 Jan 1941, *Atti*, a.XIX, 1940-41.

Cross.²⁷ After this, the only newcomer for some time was Lina Eramo Gozzi, long-serving fiduciary of Mantua, appointed on 6 December 1941.²⁸ Both she and Pironti were assigned to party headquarters, albeit part-time in Pironti's case. Strikingly, over this whole period, only two southerners - Gorjux Bruschi and Pironti – had been chosen.

At the eleventh hour, on 18 June 1943, two of the existing *ispettrici*, Gorjux Bruschi (following the unexpected death of her husband on 6 June) and Calvi Roncalli, stepped down and there was a new wave of appointments, nine in total, reflecting both an ever expanding workload and a startling failure to grasp the realities of the situation: the end of the regime was but a month away.²⁹ Those appointed included eight provincial fiduciaries (all instructed to combine both jobs) – Vendramina Marcello Brandolini (Venice); Teresa Marogna de' Lutti (Modena); Maria Ortona Valentini (Naples); Angiola Teresa Rosso (Enna); Bianca Giuliano (Foggia); Vittoria Luce Danzetta (Reggio Calabria) and Piera Gatteschi Fondelli (Rome). Giusti Dalla Rosa (who had stepped down in January 1943) was also reappointed on this date.

²⁷ After patriotic service in the Great War many Red Cross nurses rallied to fascism. On this, and on the gradual 'fascistisation' of the organisation, see Stefania Bartoloni, 'Da una guerra all'altra. Le infermiere della Croce Rossa fra il 1911 e il 1945', in L.Goglia, R.Moro, L.Nuti (eds), Guerra e pace nell'Italia del Novecento. Politica estera, cultura politica e correnti dell'opinione pubblica, Bologna, 2006.

²⁸ FD 246, 6 Dec 1941, Atti, a.XX, 1941-42. On her see ACS, PNF, DN, SV, SII, b.11, fasc. 'Eramo Gozzi, Lina'; ACS, PNF, SPEP, b.4, fasc. 'Mantova', 'Situazione gerarchica'; ACS, SPD-CO 524.215 'Mantova colonie Marine e Montane'.

²⁹ FD 19, 18 June 1943, Atti, a.XX1, 1942-3.

One noteworthy member of this group was Gatteschi Fondelli, who was soon to rise to prominence as the leader of the women's auxiliary forces in the RSI: in effect, Italy's first female army commander.³⁰ Also worth mentioning is the inclusion of a woman who does not appear to have ever been a provincial fiduciary, Countess Pia Pallotta Garzia Civico – announced simply as 'the mother of a Gold Medal holder'. The holder of this military decoration was her son, the high-ranking hierarch Guido Pallotta, who had perished 'heroically' in Africa in 1940.³¹ Because of the allied invasion of Sicily and the subsequent fall of Mussolini it seems unlikely that any of this final cohort of *ispettrici* ever took office, and, for this reason, this article concentrates on those who actually did.

IV

Some of the women who became *ispettrici* were of middle class origin. Gorjux Bruschi's father, for example, was a teacher and Franceschini's a town clerk. For the middle class women, like Lino Eramo Gozzi - a widowed schoolteacher with two dependent children³² - a wage packet could be essential. This was far from the

³⁰ On her, see Helga Dittrich-Johansen, 'Strategie femminili nel ventennio fascista: la carriera politica di Piera Gatteschi Fondelli nello "Stato degli uomini" (1919-1943)', Storia e problemi contemporanei, 21 (1998), 65-86.

³¹ On Guido Pallotta see Aldo Grandi, Il gerarca con il sorriso. L'archivio segreto di Guido Pallotta, protagonista dimenticato del fascismo, Milan, 2010. See pp.29-30 on Pia Garzia Civico herself: a 'fascist of the first hour' with wartime Red Cross experience.

³² Letter from Segretario Federale Sergio Pinotti, dated 16 Nov 1940, in ACS, PNF, DN, SV, SII, Carteggio con le Federazioni Provinciali (hereafter CFP), b.1158, fasc.55 Federazione dei Fasci di Combattimento di Mantova. Pratica personale della Fiduciaria Provinciale dei FF.FF'

case, however, for all the *ispettrici*. For Laura Calvi Roncalli, a salary was so unimportant that, from November 1942 onwards, she grandiosely donated her monthly pay-packets to her local fascist party welfare activities.³³ Likewise, Itta Stelluti Scala Frascara commanded such wealth that, in May 1940, she was able to give a large building and its grounds (valued at L.100,000) to the party youth organisations for use as a holiday centre.³⁴

Both of these women were countesses. Indeed, about half the *ispettrici*, including Pironti, Cavalli D'Olivola and Bertaina della Chiesa di Cervignasco, were aristocrats. Some had married into, rather than being born into, the aristocracy: intermarriage between aristocrats and wealthy members of the middle class was increasingly common in this period of declining revenue and status for the nobility. Marchioness Olga Medici del Vascello, for example, who was the daughter of Napoleone Leumann, a wealthy, paternalist textile entrepreneur, owed her title to her husband,³⁵ as did Baroness Teresita Menzinger. Even Angiola Moretti, a cobbler's

³³ Letter from Giovanni Montefusco to the Fascist Federation of Bergamo, 2 Dec 1942. ACS, PNF, DN, SV, SII, CFP, b.880. Fasc. 173 'Pratica personale della fiduciaria provinciale dei Fasci Femminili'. She only donated L.700, the top-up as *ispettrice* to her provincial fiduciary pay-packet.

³⁴ ACS, SPD-CO 516.126

³⁵ See Alessandra Gissi, 'Olga Medici del Vascello', in Eugenia Roccella, Lucetta Scaraffia (eds), *Italiane*, v.2. Dalla prima guerra mondiale al secondo dopoguerra, Rome, 2004. See also, ACS, SPD-CO 184.815. Olga Leumann's grandfather Isacco was a self-made man who had been a simple weaver when he immigrated to Italy from Switzerland.

daughter, managed to stride up the social scale by marrying, in 1938, the landowner and 'fascist of the first hour' Count Nestore Carosi Martinozzi.³⁶

There were, of course, many noblemen among the regime's hierarchs (mainly rallying to the regime once it was firmly in power, rather than as 'fascists of the first hour')³⁷ but the sheer numbers of female hierarchs from the aristocracy does set them apart from their male counterparts. One reason was doubtless the far greater numbers of paid jobs the party offered men, enabling men of more varied origins to make a career out of fascist politics. Many of the women, conversely, had only been able to qualify for national rank by having the sort of financial security that enabled them to gain the necessary experience through years of unpaid service to the party. A striking number of the provincial fiduciaries who did not become *ispettrici* were similarly aristocrats.³⁸ This dominance by the aristocracy and the upper middle class in FF leadership positions had, moreover, been a feature from fascism's earliest days.³⁹

Welfare, a core activity of the FF sections, was a traditional domain of the female aristocracy and the chance to play a leading role in this was certainly at least

³⁶ A curriculum vitae for Nestore Carosi Martinozzi is preserved in ACS, SPD-CO 509.504/3.

³⁷ On this point see Anthony Cardoza, Aristocrats in Bourgeois Italy. The Piedmontese Nobility, 1861-1930, Cambridge UK, 1997, p.222.

³⁸ Lists of *fiduciarie* appear in various issues of the annually published Almanacco della donna italiana. Some of the lists contain titles. See, for example, the 1932 and 1933 issues.

³⁹ On this point see Helga Dittrich-Johansen, 'Le professioniste del Pnf. Un'"aristocrazia del comando" agli ordini del Duce', Studi Storici, 42:1, 2001, p.190.

one of the motivations for activism for many of these women. Aristocrats, moreover, were likely to have the natural confidence and air of authority needed to stand their ground faced with patronising male hierarchs. Countess Sofia della Chiesa di Cervinasco, for example, as a provincial fiduciary was not afraid to send numerous complaints to party headquarters about the dearth of support her local party federation gave to welfare initiatives.⁴⁰

The majority of the *ispettrici* were married or widowed. This is perhaps unsurprising given that it was easier for married than single women to have a public role in this period. There were some unmarried women, like Franceschini and Pironti, but this was unusual. At least five were widows: Ferrari del Latte's husband Guido had been a '*sansepolcrista*' (one of the founders of the fascist movement) and Oddone Mazza's husband Filippo a high-ranking Militia officer. Menzinger and Eramo Gozzi were both war widows. Marani Argnani's husband (a railway official) had died more prosaically of gout. Widowhood could be a convenient status for this kind of activity since, as married women, widows could be active in the public sphere without compromising their respectability, yet were unconstrained by a spouse. It also could mean financial independence or, in some cases, the need to earn. The regime, moreover, venerated war widows: they appeared in numerous ceremonies as symbols of the fascist cult of war.

Quite a number of the *ispettrici* were mothers. In keeping with the regime's veneration of motherhood, it was not unusual to depict female hierarchs as

⁴⁰ Helga Dittrich-Johansen, 'Per la patria e per il Duce. Storie di fedeltà femminili nell'Italia fascista', *Genesis*, 1 (2002), p.154.

paragons of maternal virtue. Gina Federzoni, for example, was described in a gushing article in 1932 as follows: 'A most affectionate wife and mother, she represents the typical Italian woman. Woman in the highest sense of the word, able to reconcile the duties of her own social position with the tenderness of family life, the intellectual life with the humble care of the home'.⁴¹ In practice, however, wealth and social position enabled some of these mothers to offload their maternal duties onto domestic staff. In a memoir, Olga Medici del Vascello's daughter Elvina (b.1914) remembered that, for most of her childhood (in a castle near Turin), she saw her parents for only ten minutes in the mornings and half an hour each evening. For the rest of the time she and her brother were cared for by nannies and private tutors. Of her mother she said: 'Mama, unlike Papa, was very sweet and she let me do whatever I wanted, but I didn't see her much'.⁴² Only from the age of fifteen was she allowed to eat breakfast with them and she began to dine with them at eighteen. Such arrangements considerably freed up her mother's time.

Many of the *ispettrici* came from families with a history of patriotic activism. Marani Argnani's father Federigo, for example, had fought for the nation during the Risorgimento and this doubtless helped forge her extreme patriotism and unquestioning loyalty to the regime. Many others, like Countess Ignazia Cavalli

⁴¹ Anon, 'Delegazione di Roma', Almanacco della donna italiana 1932, Rome, 1933, pp.324-5. On her, see also, Anon, 'Luisa Federzoni', Almanacco della donna italiana 1933, Rome, 1934, p.30-32.

⁴² 'Elvina Pallavicini', in Sandra Artom, Anna Rita Calabrò (eds), Sorelle d'Italia. Quattordici Grandi Signore raccontano la loro (e la nostra) storia, Milan, 1989, p.237.

d'Olivola, who was the granddaughter of a Risorgimental military hero, similarly had patriotic forebears.

Most of the *ispettrici* were middle aged. The youngest, in their late thirties when appointed, had been young during the 'fascist revolution', part of the 'generational revolt' that characterised early fascism. Franceschini, Abruzzese and Moretti, for example, were, at the time of their appointments as *ispettrici*, 37, 38 and 40 respectively. Others were older, like Gorjux Bruschi who was 48 when appointed, Medici del Vascello 55, Menzinger 59 and Marani Argnani a striking 72. For this older cohort, the experience of the First World War had been formative. Federzoni (b.1892), for example, had been awarded the 'war cross' for nursing service at the front.⁴³ Ferrari del Latte (b.1890) had been active in irredentist and monarchist organisations during the war and an energetic wartime propagandist, publishing numerous patriotic pamphlets and press articles and touring round giving speeches.⁴⁴ Marani Argnani (b.1865) received a silver medal from the War Ministry for her work mobilising the staff and students of her teacher training college for activities like making clothing for the troops.⁴⁵ Calvi Roncalli (b.1888) had been vice-president of the League of the Sowers of Courage, a nationwide women's

⁴³ Anon, 'Delegazione di Roma', p.324.

⁴⁴ Her wartime publications included pamphlets like Il nostro dovere (parole alle donne), Milan, 1916 and A noi, donne...(per il fronte interno), Milan, 1917, which, in their passionate tone and emphasis on 'moral resistance' – the need for women to adopt a new mentality and behaviour to support the nation – prefigure many themes of fascist propaganda.

⁴⁵ 'Stato personale Laura Argnani in Marani', in Archivio dell'Istituto Superiore Statale "Matilde di Canossa", b. 'Personale insegnante che non è più nell'Istituto', fasc. 'Preside Marani e seguenti fino al 1934-35'.

organisation which aimed to rally the population for the war effort and combat 'defeatism'.⁴⁶

Levels of education were mostly good for women of their day. Quite a few were graduates. Menzinger (born in 1878 in Bergamo to a family of well-known doctors), for example, was one of the first female medical graduates at Siena University.⁴⁷ Other graduates included Bertaina della Chiesa, Eramo Gozzi and Gorjux Bruschi (who had two degrees, one in History and Geography and one in Literature). Ferrari del Latte had spent three years at university although apparently without graduating. The middle class *ispettrici* like Moretti, Ferrari del Latte and Franceschini generally had teaching qualifications of various kinds and, indeed, the professional backgrounds of those who had prior experience of paid employment were heavily dominated by teaching. Countess Itta Stelluti Scala had attended (although not completed) the International Course of Training for Public Health Nurses at Bedford College in London.⁴⁸

V

The route to national rank was paved, for most of these women, with years of unpaid, voluntary service to the party. This fact has been somewhat obscured in

⁴⁶ Augusta Molinari, Donne e ruoli femminili nell'Italia della Grande Guerra, Milan, 2008, p.32.

⁴⁷ Petra Terhoeven, Oro alla patria. Donne, guerra e propaganda nella giornata della Fede fascista, Bologna, 2006, p.241.

⁴⁸ She left after completing only two of the three terms of study in 1922-23. See the correspondence in Bedford College Archive, Royal Holloway, 3307A. See also the report on this course in the British Journal of Nursing, July 14 1923, p.27 which lists her as receiving only a 'Special Certificate'.

the existing historiography which has tended to assume that many of these voluntary roles were, in fact, paid ones. This gives the impression that some female hierarchs were, at least in part, just women looking for a job. De Grazia, for example, has asserted that, by the late 1930s, the *visitatrici fasciste* (fascist home visitors) – a much more lowly rank - had become professionals, ‘wore uniforms, and were salaried’.⁴⁹ Helga Dittrich-Johansen likewise states that the ‘*visitatrici*’ were: ‘Promoted to the grade of social workers, organised and salaried’.⁵⁰ My own extensive research in PNF archives, however, has never uncovered the least evidence that these women were paid and indeed their sheer numbers (one source, for example, states that there were 25,950 in the province of Genoa alone in 1936)⁵¹ makes this highly improbable. De Grazia is correct in her assertion that training was provided for them but this was simply to ensure that this army of volunteers had some knowledge of ‘modern welfare’. Their ‘uniforms’ were the standard FF uniforms which, from January 1937, they were required to wear for home visits to emphasise their status as party envoys, just with a special badge.⁵²

Similarly, Dittrich-Johansen has mistakenly assumed that the secretaries of local FF groups (just above the home visitors in the party pecking order) were paid.

⁴⁹ De Grazia, *How fascism*, p.262.

⁵⁰ Dittrich-Johansen, *Le “militi dell’idea”*, p.153.

⁵¹ Maria Guidi, ‘Fasci femminili’, *Almanacco della donna italiana*, 1936, p.300.

⁵² FD 728, 28 Jan 1937, *Atti*, a.XV, 1936-7. It is possible that De Grazia has confused them with the (small numbers of) social workers who, after training in the party’s own Scuola Superiore Fascista per Assistenti Sociali, were employed by the corporative organisations or private firms.

She argues that 'from the second half of the 1930s, hundreds of secretaries from remote, peripheral *fasci* got access to the unprecedented social status which came from holding a paid, public office.'⁵³ The many widows among them, she argues, were 'driven, less by faith in an *idea*, than by the far more prosaic opportunity of supplementing a tiny survivor's pension with a salary and the expenses that section leaders had access to'.⁵⁴ She may be correct that some enjoyed the prestige of the position but local secretaries were, in fact, unpaid. Many were primary teachers, for whom fascist activism became, to a degree, a normal part of their job, a 'voluntary activity' they were unable to avoid. Even the much higher-ranking Provincial Fiduciaries only began to receive salaries in October 1940.⁵⁵

Of course party federations did offer some paid work for women, mainly seasonal employment in summer holiday camps for poor and sickly children or clerical roles in local party offices. Another paid role appeared in 1938, that of Technical Leader for the Rural Housewives section, trained at the party's own college

⁵³ Dittrich-Johansen, 'Le professioniste del Pnf', p.200.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.196.

⁵⁵ The decision to pay provincial fiduciaries was announced with a circular dated 30 September 1940. If they had another job, as a teacher, for example, and could get a paid secondment, they were paid only the difference between the two salaries. A copy of this circular is conserved in ACS, PNF, SV, SII, CFP, b.862, fasc. 'Federazione di Bari. Singoli fascicoli del personale ordinati alfabeticamente'. In November 1940, the minimum for *federali* (male fascist leaders in each province) was L.3,000. With annual increments and a bonus for larger provinces, some got L.8,000 per month. Provincial Fiduciaries' pay, in contrast, ranged between L.1,000-3,500. They also got lower daily expenses rates. (Circular of 25 November 1940, in *ibid.*, b.820, Federazione dei Fasci di Combattimento di Ancona, Fasc. 'Pratica personale della Fiduciaria Provinciale dei Fasci Femminili'.)

near Rome, but only one was appointed in each province.⁵⁶ Overall, paid work was limited and most of the numerous administrative, welfare and political tasks of the FF federations were done by volunteers. For most *ispettrici*, therefore, appointment to national rank was not the culmination of a long clamber up the party career ladder since this barely existed for women (apart from, to some extent, in Rome) before 1940.

Only in a minority of cases were the long years of service to the fascist cause, which were generally necessary for promotion to national rank, years of paid service. Clara Franceschini, for example, had combined her role as (unpaid) provincial fiduciary in Pavia (since 1925) with various welfare-related paid positions.⁵⁷ Another example was Angiola Moretti who had been employed by the PNF from 1925 to 1936, firstly as FF Secretary, then as Inspector of the Scuole Superiori Femminili Fasciste (the three party colleges offering vocational training for certain professions deemed 'suitable for women'). For most of this time she also had a teaching job, for which she drew a second salary.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ On the Technical Leaders and the college see Willson, Peasant women and politics, ch.7.

⁵⁷ On Franceschini see ACS, PNF, DN, SV, SII, b.10, fasc. 'Clara Franceschini'.

⁵⁸ See the letter from her to Giovanni Marinelli, dated 8 Jan 1937, in ACS, PNF, DN, SV, SII, b.37, fasc. 'Angiola Moretti'. She earned quite well during this time. In 1933, for example, the party paid her L.1,650 monthly in addition to nearly 2,000 from her teaching job, an excellent income for a woman. (Ibid.) She lost the party job on 26.10.1936.

But even those who apparently ‘worked’ for the party were not necessarily paid by it. The example of Rachele Ferrari del Latte is instructive.⁵⁹ Born in Milan, she began work as a primary teacher in 1907 and by 1928 was a headmistress. After participating in the Fiume expedition, she joined the PNF in November 1923 and then helped found many of the first Milanese FF groups. From 1926 to 1930 she sat on the Directorate of the Milanese FF and from 1926 to 1932 was in charge of the Milanese fascist girls’ groups. During the entire *ventennio* she also earned money by a prolific output of journalist writing: pamphlets, magazine articles and even some (dreadful) poetry, all with a highly propagandistic tone. Ferrari del Latte was a widow from a very fascist family: both her husband Guido del Latte and her father Arturo Ferrari had been ‘fascists of the first hour’. When her father died in 1932, she became head of family with responsibility for various relatives. She then moved to Rome where she began working full-time at PNF Headquarters both for the FF and the Fascist Association for the Families of the Fallen, Mutilated or Wounded for the Revolution. This work seems to have been unpaid and she relied on her earnings from her teaching post (from which she was officially seconded on full pay, just as she had been in Milan for part of the time she ran the girls’ organisations). Financially, the secondment was damaging as it forced her to take a step down to the pay grade of a simple class teacher. Correspondence in her file in the PNF archive shows how she tried to use her political connections to get a promotion in her teaching grade (blocked because she was not actually doing the job) or otherwise to

⁵⁹ The following information on her is taken from a curriculum vitae (dated 1937) and various letters in ACS, SPD-CO 548.001.

obtain funding (asking her political connections, for example, to buy paintings by her father) and this led, eventually to her appointment to the well-paid rank of *ispettrice nazionale*. In her case, a long history of working for the party had not, in practice, been financially advantageous, until she was rewarded by promotion to *ispettrice*.

These four examples were all women for whom the appointment as *ispettrice* was the culmination of some sort of career path in the party, women who could perhaps be described as what Dittrich-Johansen has termed 'professional fascists'.⁶⁰ As *ispettrici*, they all worked at central party headquarters. They were, however, not typical. Most, instead, rose to prominence through long years of voluntary toil as provincial fiduciaries, proving their worth by building up local FF federations. It is likely, therefore, that most were confident, tenacious women of not inconsiderable political acumen and administrative ability.

A good example was Laura Marani Argnani. From 1929 onwards she was provincial fiduciary in Reggio Emilia, a role she combined with a full-time job as principal of the local teacher training college. An elderly widow, she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to both activities and, under her energetic rule, this became a flagship province in terms of female party membership, a striking achievement in an area with strong socialist traditions.⁶¹ Likewise, Wanda Gorjux Bruschi, appointed on the same day as Marani Argnani, had been provincial FF leader in Bari since 1926, another left-wing area which required a tough attitude to succeed. She had similarly

⁶⁰ See Dittrich-Johansen, 'Le professioniste del Pnf'.

⁶¹ On this particularly dedicated fascist see Perry Willson, 'The Fairy Tale Witch': Laura Marani Argnani and the Women's Fasci of Reggio Emilia 1929-1940', Contemporary European History, 15:1 (2006) pp.23-42.

combined political work for the party with a career, in her case as a writer and journalist.⁶² She combined her role as *ispettrice* with continuing service as a provincial FF leader until January 1943, when she finally stepped down as provincial fiduciary.⁶³

Of course, one of the prerequisites for becoming an *ispettrice* was an ability to steer a way through the complex world of fascist party politics, with its factions, intrigues and back-stabbings. In this context, political patrons could be useful. The political career of the ambitious Angiola Moretti, for example, was undoubtedly assisted by the fact that she was able to count on powerful political patrons like party secretary Turati and the prominent Roman politician and academic Nazareno Padellaro. Likewise, Rachele Ferrari del Latte could rely on the patronage of Starace. Some *ispettrici* could make use of connections forged in the heady days of early fascism but more established social networks could be equally useful and this was doubtless true for many of the noblewomen.

Some of the *ispettrici* were married to men of influence in the fascist regime and this may have been a factor facilitating their appointment. Olga Medici del Vascello's husband Giacomo, for example, was, from 1935 to 1939, Mussolini's Cabinet Secretary. Gina Federzoni's husband Luigi (whom she married in May 1918) was a prominent political figure, albeit one with a somewhat problematic

⁶² On Wanda Gorjux, see E. Santarelli, 'Protagoniste femminili del primo Novecento', *Problemi del socialismo*, 4 (1976) pp.236-7. See also: ACS, PNF, SV, SII, CFP, b.862, fasc. 'Federazione di Bari. Singoli fascicoli del personale ordinati alfabeticamente', s.fasc 'Pratica personale della fiduciaria provinciale. Wanda Gorjux Bruschi'.

⁶³ FD 159, 5 Jan 1943, *Atti*, a.XXI, 1942-3.

relationship with the regime.⁶⁴ This is not true, however, of all the *ispettrici* and it is important to stress that that these were far from simply honorary positions doled out to the wives of fascist bigwigs. In some cases (such as Gorjux Bruschi⁶⁵ and Marani Argnani) the *ispettrici* themselves were considerably more enthusiastic about fascist politics than their husbands were.

Although the patronage system means that it would be naive to see the choice of these particular women as simply the product of a meritocracy, many *ispettrici* were in fact well-qualified for the position, with extensive organisational and political experience, particularly those with years of service as provincial fiduciaries. Some were chosen for specialised competencies. Clara Franceschini, for example, who had considerable experience mobilising and providing welfare for seasonal rice-weeders in her home province of Pavia, was initially recruited primarily to run the section for rural women. Similarly both Stelluti Scala and Pironti brought expertise on nursing issues. Menzinger was, from 1936, president of ANFCDG (the National Fascist Association for the War Dead). This organisation, which pre-dated

⁶⁴ A Nationalist who had lent his support to Fascism, Luigi Federzoni was appointed Minister of the Interior during the Matteotti crisis as Mussolini attempted to reassure the critics of fascist violence. During the 1930s he held various positions, including being President of the Senate, but was never again admitted to Fascism's inner circles. Much has been written about him. See, for example, Albertina Vittoria, 'Federzoni, Luigi', in Dizionario biografico degli italiani, Rome, vol.45, 1995, ad vocem; Alexander De Grand, The Italian Nationalist Association and the rise of fascism in Italy, Lincoln, 1978.

⁶⁵ On Wanda and her husband Raffaele see, for example, Alessandra Cimmino, 'Raffaele Gorjux', Dizionario biografico degli italiani, vol.58, 2002, ad vocem.

the rise of fascism, was progressively subordinated to the politics of the regime until, in 1941, it was absorbed into the PNF.

The route to national rank was somewhat different for some of the group appointed in June 1943 for by then there was a whole cohort of women who had been working as paid fiduciaries at provincial level. Once on the payroll, provincial fiduciaries became if anything even more subordinate to the party hierarchy. Previously, fiduciaries had emerged from their local environment where they could rely on their own networks and connections. Now, however, as salaried party employees, they could be transferred to another province far from home at the convenience of their superiors and this undoubtedly weakened their position.

VI

The limitations of the sources available (particularly the fact that of the 26 *ispettrici*, only one – Gatteschi Fondelli – left a memoir),⁶⁶ render it difficult to get to grips with the inner beliefs of these women. It would, of course, be foolish to argue that there was only one reason – such as political conviction, power, or money – why women were interested in becoming fascist hierarchs: this was a varied group and the meaning of acceding to this elevated rank was similarly varied for different *ispettrici*. The case for economic motivations, however, does seem to have been overstated in the historiography. For many, becoming an *ispettrice* was less about

⁶⁶ 'Il memoriale di Piera Gatteschi Fondelli', in Luciano Garibaldi, *Le soldatesse di Mussolini*, Milan, 1995, pp.31-89. In this memoir, she asserts (inaccurately) that she became an *ispettrice nazionale* in 1940 (p.38).

money than about the prestige and sense of self-importance the role gave them, the chance to make a mark and, of course, the hope of treading the corridors of power.

Some of the *ispettrici*, like Amalia Oddone Mazza Ferrario and Clara Franceschini, were 'fascists of the first hour'. Their commitment to the politics of fascism is hard to doubt (although that politics had, of course, itself changed considerably by the 1930s). Indeed, some *ispettrici* were exemplars of fascist zeal and loyalty to Mussolini. Laura Marani Argnani was so patriotic that her teacher training college students joked that she wore tricolour underwear.⁶⁷ She was certainly someone who saw fascism essentially as a faith, something to follow totally and unquestioningly. Similarly, for the war widow Teresita Menzinger (her husband, the much decorated Guido Menzinger, had fallen at Costesin in May 1916),⁶⁸ fascism quite simply made sense. As her grandson (similarly named Guido) commented: 'As a war widow, she felt that only the Right appreciated and recognised those in her particular situation'. He also recalled that: 'She always used to talk about the respectful attitude early fascists had to relatives of the war dead they met on the street. All her life she saw herself as a widow, she always wore a veil and dressed in black'.⁶⁹ During her presidency of ANFCDG, she completed its subordination to the regime, even to the extent of purging it of its 'non-aryan' members.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Marco Mietto, Maria Grazia Ruggerini, '"Faber est suae quisque fortunae". Gli studenti del Liceo Classico e dell'Istituto Magistrale a Reggio Emilia, negli anni Trenta', *Contributi*, 11, (1987) p.323.

⁶⁸ Terhoeven, *Oro alla patria*, p.370n.

⁶⁹ Guido Menzinger, interviewed by Petra Terhoeven in 1999 (Ibid., p.242.)

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.241.

The situation, however, was slightly less straightforward for some of the other *ispettrici*. Far from all were fascists of the first hour. Lina Eramo Gozzi and Itta Stelluti Scala who both joined the PNF in 1927, when the regime was firmly in power, were by no means unusual.

It is possible that some of them, particularly the noblewomen, may have been, at heart, more patriots than dyed-in-the wool fascists. Gina Federzoni, for example, seems to have been more a conservative elitist than a true fascist. According to her daughter Elena, she had reservations about what she saw as the upstart plebeians in power: her daughter claimed that: 'We only went once to Villa Torlonia, to visit the Mussolini children: Mamma said they were too badly behaved'.⁷¹ Unlike some of the other *ispettrici*, Federzoni had served as a provincial leader (in Rome) for only two years (1931-33). Her daughter maintained, moreover, that she had accepted this role reluctantly and only to protect the career of her husband.⁷² This perhaps explains why she was the *ispettrice* with the shortest term of office (May-August 1940).

Levels of heartfelt fascist zeal may have varied but all were nonetheless willing to act as mouthpieces for the regime, trotting out the latest propaganda themes for the FF membership. All gave speeches and many wrote for the press in fascist vein. Both Gorjux Bruschi and Ferrari del Latte were experienced writers who produced plenty of propaganda for the press. In 1938, for example, Gorjux Bruschi

⁷¹ Barbara Palombelli, 'Noi, la famiglia Federzoni. Papà disse no a Mussolini', Corriere della Sera, 5 Mar 2001, p.20.

⁷² Dittrich-Johansen, Le "militi" dell'idea, pp.230-1.

wrote that half-hearted enthusiasm was not enough. Women should throw themselves into their mission of patriotism and motherhood, disseminating fascist ideas and helping to forge a new civilisation.⁷³ Similarly, in 1938, after approvingly citing Mussolini's slogan for women: 'You must be the guardians of the hearth', Ignazia Cavalli d'Olivola wrote of the Duce's 'sense of infinite love for his people'.⁷⁴

As these examples suggest, the *ispettrici* were not the most ideologically interesting of prominent fascist women. They mainly tended to rehash fascist propaganda without much personal rethinking. In their writings it is, for example, difficult to discern any challenge, however muted, to fascist gender ideas. The only exception was, to an extent, Wanda Gorjux, undoubtedly one of the more intelligent women among them, who did veer onto almost feminist positions at times, expressing the opinion, for example, that some women needed to work and that working could be beneficial for women.⁷⁵ But this was not a group likely to attempt to reinvent fascism in some sort of way for potential trouble-makers were generally not chosen for this job.

None seem to have been prominent feminists before the rise of fascism, although some of the older *ispettrici* had doubtless mixed with moderate feminists in the past and may have themselves had moderate feminist beliefs. The Sowers of Courage, the patriotic organisation in which Calvi Roncalli had been active, for

⁷³ Wanda Gorjux, 'Vita della donna fascista', Almanacco della donna, 1938, pp.21-23.

⁷⁴ Ignazia Cavalli d'Olivola, 'Alle Massaie della Provincia di Torino', in Ida Lupo Cantoni (ed.), Per te massaia custode del focolare, Turin, 1938, p.5

⁷⁵ Wanda Gorjux Bruschi, 'Professioni della donna', Il giornale della donna, XV:4, 15 Feb 1933, pp.1-2.

example, was run by the moderate feminist Sofia Bisi Albini. Wanda Gorjux seems to have been the only one of them who had written on the 'woman question'. In their writings as *ispettrici* they were generally prepared to dutifully trot out the official line of women as ideal mothers and wives, however much their own lives contradicted this. In 1935, for example, Marani Argnani, in many ways herself a born leader, argued in a speech that: 'fascist women will always cook men's dinners and darn their socks: nor will they aspire to leadership roles nor look for personal glory.'⁷⁶

The rights of women were, in any case, firmly off the agenda by the late 1930s and these women's prominent public role was made palatable by presenting it less as politics than the more acceptable 'welfare'. Of course feminists too had emphasised welfare but they had seen it as a path to 'emancipation'. There was no space for such ideas in the PNF by 1937. The disappearance of a feminist agenda from the fascist women's press (which had existed in the early years) had not happened overnight but, by this time, was more or less complete. Welfare was now entirely presented as selfless dedication to a higher cause – the nation.

VII

After the fall of Mussolini in July 1943, the fate of the *ispettrici* was mixed. In August Clara Franceschini lost her job at ONMI - the maternal welfare organisation -

⁷⁶ Laura Marani Argnani, 'La donna nel Fascismo. Lezione tenuta all'Istituto fascista di cultura di Reggio Emilia - 9 marzo 1935', Annuario del R. Istituto Magistrale "Principessa di Napoli" in Reggio Emilia (1933-4), p.88.

due to her political past, and this presumably happened to all employed by party organisations. Interestingly, when the Political Police were asked to comment on this sacking, they argued that Franceschini should not be dismissed as she had so much useful welfare management experience, and, in their view (sweeping aside her long service to fascism), she had 'not been politically active except in welfare'.⁷⁷ After 8 September, however, Franceschini showed her true colours: according to Maria Fraddosio she was one of only five *ispettrici* who remained loyal to Mussolini, the others being Ferrari del Latte, Marani Argnani, Abruzzese and Gatteschi Fondelli.⁷⁸

Rachele Ferrari del Latte continued her role as a propagandist, making, for example, a radio broadcast 'To the women of Italy' on 3 December 1943, in an effort to rally women to the RSI.⁷⁹ Licia Abruzzese became the leader of the Gruppi fascisti repubblicani femminili, effectively a continuation of the FF. Gatteschi Fondelli became Italy's first female general as leader of the fascist auxiliary forces. Marani Argnani, who was very elderly by now, seems to have played no particular role.

The apparent defection of the rest is partly explicable by the complexities of the war situation (some doubtless simply found themselves on the wrong side of the front line) and by the predominance of noblewomen. Few aristocrats, of either sex,

⁷⁷ ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Divisione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza, Divisione Affari Riservati, Polizia Politica, fascicoli personali, b.524, fasc. 'Franceschini Carla'. Pro-memoria 7 Sep 1943.

⁷⁸ Maria Fraddosio, 'La mobilitazione femminile: i Gruppi fascisti repubblicani femminili e il SAF', Annali della Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, 2 (1986), 257-74, p.261n.

⁷⁹ Luisa Quartermaine, Mussolini's Last Republic. Propaganda and Politics in the Italian Social Republic 1943-45, Exeter, 2000, p.47.

remained loyal to the Duce after his dismissal by the king. Their failure to rally to the RSI, therefore, is probably more to do with their devotion to the monarchy than to any fundamental ambivalence about the politics of the regime. Gina Federzoni's husband was one of the plotters who overthrew Mussolini in July 1943 and, condemned to death by the RSI, fled abroad. Some quickly reinvented their politics: according to one source, by March 1944 Countess Itta Stelluti Scala Frascara was in prison in Macerata accused of 'assisting English prisoners'.⁸⁰

In the post-war years, perhaps unsurprisingly, none of these women seem to have played a political role, although political silence did not necessarily mean a change of heart. Marani Argnani, for example, who retired to live quietly in a convent in Bologna, remained faithful to her political beliefs for the rest of her life,⁸¹ as did Gatteschi Fondelli. Wanda Gorjux Bruschi was sentenced to two years in internal exile⁸² but most seem to have escaped unpunished for their service to the regime, although the lightness of the post-fascism purge makes this unsurprising. Some continued to pursue a welfare agenda in a changed context. Stelluti Scala Frascara, for example, published a book on nutrition in 1954.

Conclusion

⁸⁰ Diary of Andreola Vinci Gigliucci, entry for 8 March 1944 in Alessandro Perini (ed.), I diari di Babka 1943-1944. Aristocrazia antifascista e missioni segrete, 2007, p.123.

⁸¹ Gino Badini, 'La donna? Ai fornelli', Il Resto del Carlino, 28 Dec 1982, p.3.

⁸² Santarelli, 'Protagoniste femminili', pp.236-7.

An examination of the role of the *ispettrici nazionali* serves to illustrate both the essentially weak position of women in the PNF as well as their expanding role and importance during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The very fact that the Fasci Femminili were led by a group, not an individual, was, of course, itself a problem. They might have been able to assert themselves more effectively with a single leader, the equivalent of someone like Armida Barelli in the Catholic women's organisations.

The creation of the new office of *ispettrice* constituted official recognition of the growing importance of the FF, but this recognition came at a price. In the 1920s, party women had had some autonomy and even in the 1930s, at provincial level, fiduciaries were local women with considerable scope for creating a local fiefdom, albeit under the watchful, often belittling, gaze of male provincial hierarchs. After 1940 they were increasingly subordinate to the centre, cogs in an ever expanding wheel, who could be transferred at short notice to a post elsewhere.

At this point, during the war, some sort of 'career ladder' for women did emerge,⁸³ but Helga Dittrich-Johansen's description of female fascist hierarchs as 'Pnf professionals' fits only a minority of the women examined here. It does apply, in certain respects, to some of the middle class *ispettrici*, for whom this work was a form of paid employment, necessary for their economic survival and for whom promotion to national rank was an important professional accolade. But most of

⁸³ For example, Dora Budi, who became Provincial Fiduciary in Bergamo in 1942, had previously been a clerk for the Ravenna FF Federation. ACS, PNF, DN, SV, SII, CFP, b.880, fasc.173 'Pratica personale della fiduciaria provinciale dei Fasci Femminili'. There is similar example in *ibid.*, b.1158.

them had no need to earn a living. For the latter group, the position meant primarily prestige, a certain amount of influence, and a chance to further their own agendas in areas like welfare policy. Many doubtless saw the extra stripe on their uniform badges as official recognition for their personal achievements during long years of often thankless service as provincial fiduciaries. It would be quite erroneous, however, to see the first group as women primarily motivated by the need to get a job and the second as the 'real fascists': all five *ispettrici* who stayed loyal to Mussolini after 1943 came from this 'professional' group. Motivations for political engagement are, of course, always too complex to reduce to single explanations and doubtless a range of factors should be taken into account, but paid employment was not really the issue for most of them, for the PNF offered slim pickings for women in this respect. Whatever their motives for taking on this role, however, the *ispettrici* as a group were women who, in public at least, dutifully followed official positions, and were selected primarily for their loyalty and organisational skills rather than for any sort of originality of thinking.

The fascist regime did, despite its misogynist ideology, open up new spaces for women and the very existence of the *ispettrici nazionali* is a good symbol of this. However, the constraints on these women was hardly a good precedent on which post-war women politicians could build. Instead, it was one more likely to act as a brake on women's future political authority. Despite their high rank, they were not allowed to interfere in any matters that did not concern women (or children) whereas male fascists were allowed to think for both sexes. This problematic precedent was just one of the many hurdles faced by post-war democratically

elected women and it might help explain why the newly elected female parliamentarians of the post-war republic found it so difficult to make their mark in areas not deemed 'women's issues'.⁸⁴ The first attempt by a woman to intervene in a parliamentary debate on foreign policy, for example, was greeted with hostility and contempt by the journalists present.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ On these female parliamentarians see Molly Tambor, The Lost Wave. Women and Democracy in Postwar Italy, New York, 2014.

⁸⁵ Anna Garofalo, L'italiana in Italia, Bari, 1956, p.105.